TIMELESS, TIRELESS – AND TERRIFIC

By Julie Wilson

One might call them "The Grandes Dames of New York." But not to their faces. They would react to that term with polite incredulity and deftly change the subject, allowing the transgressor to scramble to safer conversational ground. That term is, after all, a bit too facile and not entirely flattering. "Grande dame" suggests imperiousness and autocratic behavior . . . to say nothing of haughty mien. New York's Mrs. William Astor, who attempted—rather successfully—not only to dictate society's rules but also to decree which 400 families constituted society during the 1880s, was often called a grande dame. No one dared call her anything else.

These ladies are of a different time, and cut from a different cloth. They are gentler, more sensitive and a lot less silly. They are concerned with making things better in the world, not with carving their names in society's marble. Nevertheless, they are the city's most established, sought-after social leaders, and have been for some time. Ladies of impeccable instincts, they are skilled in the art of negotiation, able to rally the troops, soothe ruffled feathers, forge creative alliances.

They are also entirely, distinctly New York. They share the city's cosmopolitan outlook, reveling in the variety and excitement. They share its wry, ironic sense of humor, a humor particular to this singular place—a city of dreams but no illusions.

As up-to-date as this morning's *New York Times*, they grow—in a paradoxical way—more contemporary with age. Captivating companions, they speak not with the authority of age but with the authority of experience, and with the vitality of women oriented toward today and tomorrow. Attractive young people seek them out at parties, and hope to sit next to them at dinner. Few young people, one suspects, hoped to sit next to Mrs. William Astor at dinner.

And yet, in this different time, they work just as hard as Mrs. Astor—or as Mrs. Arthur Drexel of Philadelphia, who once trumpeted: "We society women work until we drop down in harness." Though the current generation might shy away from the inelegant image of dray horses falling in their tracks, they wouldn't argue the point. These society ladies do work, very hard—each with her own particular style. Those who make a difference range from the New York Public Library's high-profile champion Brooke (whose profile is *so* high that no one calls her Mrs. Vincent Astor anymore) to the publicity-shy Alice Tully, who has always seemed surprised by the attention she attracted after John D. Rockefeller 3rd persuaded her to put her name on the Lincoln Center chamber-music hall that she had funded anonymously.

Whatever style these ladies adopt, however, it is never the superficial manner of a dilettante. Each does things thoroughly, with the organizational ability of a field marshal, the tenacity of a terrier, the dedication of an abbess. Because of their up-to-the-elbows involvement, they are on "the cutting edge" (a buzzword at which they would also register polite incredulity). They know about medical advances before those advances become widely known. They spot tomorrow's opera stars long before those young talents grace a major stage. They know which buildings will be saved, where the next public garden will be planted . . . and probably know where the bodies are buried.

Mixing joyously in the Manhattan fray, and yet maintaining a well-bred detachment from it all, they know the politicians, the partygivers, the society figures and the grocers. They know everyone worth knowing, know a lot of people not worth knowing—and are much too polite to tell you the difference.

While these ladies do not attempt—as did Mrs. William Astor long ago—to dictate the rules of society, their demeanor is so essentially fine that it serves, if not as a model, as a shining reminder. So perhaps, instead of Grandes Dames, we should call them the Great Ladies of New York. Embracing its past, present and future, they represent all that is best in this golden, gritty and glorious city.

The only one of them who can claim the enviable status of "real" New Yorker is Edna Morris, who was born here as Edna Brokaw, and grew up on upper Fifth Avenue back in the days when a young lady did not leave the house without her gloves.

Now living a few blocks south, the tall, elegant widow of Thoroughbred-racing titan John A. Morris (the family owns the oldest racing silks in America) has never lost her sense of wonder about New York's variety. "You can do anything here," she marvels. "You can go bird-watching or opera listening; you can dress up and go out, or dress down and go roller skating." Though it is difficult to imagine the regal Edna Morris roller skating, her friends insist that one should not dismiss that possibility.

While loving the intensity of this "100 percent city," even she searches for havens from the urban pressure. Naturally, they are right within city boundaries. She describes walking deep into Central Park and finding an azalea in unexpected bloom, and talks of walking to the garden near the Museum of the City of New York "where banks of tulips are reflected in a pool."

The museum and its grounds are familiar territory to Edna Morris, who serves on the President's Council for that particular New York treasure. Most people, however, connect her name with the Girl Scout Council of Greater New York, Inc., an organization that she has served for over half a century, and of which she is currently vice-president. Well known for marshaling the myriad details of successful benefits over the years, she figures that, having reached 80, she can now leave some of the planning to younger volunteers. Characteristically mixing metaphors in the most lucid manner, she says, "I've hung up my gloves. I don't want to be a headwaiter anymore."

Not that she's slowed down noticeably; she's just gotten more selective, realizing that one can easily get swamped in New York. Thoroughbred racing and all that goes with it are tops on her list. "My one aim in life," she says, "is to keep the Morris colors flying, to do my level best to get a good horse that will win an important race—so that my husband would be proud. I want to perpetuate his name in the sport he loved the best. He was a gentle gentleman." She recently finished organizing and dedicating the John A. Morris Memorial Library in Lexington, Kentucky. Then she graced the Belmont Ball (given in her honor this year) and any number of benefits—attired in her customary Scaasi gowns and pearl chokers.

Edna Morris thrives on her energetic pace, for it is the pace of a true New Yorker, one who claims she does everything better under pressure. "You can't loiter below 57th Street, you know." She leans forward excitedly: "You've got to swim with the fish or get mowed down." One of her favorite stories concerns the Manhattanite who gently prodded an out-of-towner up the subway steps, saying: "Would you mind moving a little faster, sir? You're in New York now."

Not that this lifelong New Yorker loves her city without reservation. Remembering a time when Fifth Avenue was "so beautiful," when one didn't have to dodge skateboards and bicycles, when being caught eating on the street meant being sent to one's room for the day, she regrets—and she pauses carefully to find the exact words—"the loss of dignity." Now, she con-

PREVIOUS PAGE: *In addition to the carved and polychromed nineteenth-century Venetian peacock furniture, the two carved stags that served as inn signposts in England during the eighteenth century are courtesy of Newel Art Galleries. The World Financial Center features specialty shops, restaurants and a visual and performing arts program. Mrs. Lasker is wearing a Philippe Venet gown; Mrs. Ault, a Stavropoulos; Mrs. Hall, a Valentino; and Mrs. Morris, a Scaasi.*

tinues, "there are loud radios everywhere, food stands on every corner, and people wearing—or not wearing—the most outrageous things." (Among the things they are not wearing are gloves. Edna Morris still is.) But, being both tolerant and philosophical about such things, she brightens immediately. "You've just got to rise above it—and with my height, that's not hard."

With her height (five feet, eleven inches), she's also easily spotted, and this well-known New Yorker is hailed on the street by friends, by acquaintances, by her sons' friends and by the occasional stranger. "I try to respond to every spark of friendship that comes my way," she says. "I'd hate to snub someone unintentionally, just because I couldn't remember who he is." Nevertheless, she insists that not everyone knows everyone else in this enormous metropolis; even these, the city's most-established social leaders, do not constitute a "circle." For one other New Yorker, however, Edna Morris has special praise: "Mildred Hilson is absolutely extraordinary."

A lot of people think Mildred Hilson is absolutely extraordinary, especially people at The Hospital for Special Surgery, for which she has raised well over $15 million. Back in 1952, when the hospital asked her to join the board, this deceptively gentle lady with the halo of white hair would have found such a sum daunting, for she had never done fundraising of that magnitude. She just waded in. "I was flabbergasted when someone agreed to contribute, but that gave me the courage to go on to the next person, and the next, and then to the corporations." These Manhattan ladies do have a way of rising to the occasion.

She wasn't always a Manhattan lady. Born Mildred Stern, she spent her first six months in Brooklyn; then her family moved to a stoop house on Central Park West, where she had an opera star named Geraldine Farrar for a neighbor. The singer, who was given to wearing broad-brimmed feathered hats, was driven home daily in an open landau past crowds of admiring "Gerry Flappers."

Intrigued by this glamour, Mildred Stern went down to the Metropolitan Opera and bought standing-room tickets. And that began a lifelong fascination with the magical world of Manhattan. There are (her eyes still shine with the wonder of it) "as many things to do in this city as you could want to do . . . and you can do as much of anything as you want to do."

The political life of the nation, as well as of the city, has long been one of her chief concerns. For the last half-century, she has supported the Republican Party—ever since she and her husband, investment banker Edwin I. Hilson, heard Wendell Wilkie speak at The Economic Club. Wives, she recalls, were allowed to sit in the balcony on such occasions.

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Her political commitments have a way of leading to personal friendships. Dwight David Eisenhower painted a portrait of her that hangs next to the fireplace in the den of her apartment. She looks at the portrait with a kind smile. "He wasn't much of an artist," she admits; "but he was a nice man and a good friend." Just after Edwin Hilson died, the Eisenhowers invited her to the Inauguration, and subsequently to various state dinners, which she attended with some trepidation ("I wasn't important enough to be there") and typical aplomb ("but I figured that none of the other guests knew that"). At her 90th birthday party on March 30 of this year, Richard M. Nixon gave a well-received toast, saying that if Mildred Hilson were ten years younger, she would be an ideal running-mate for George Bush. She has come a long way from the balcony.

Interested though she is in politics, her conversation inevitably turns back to her work for The Hospital for Special Surgery, which she describes as "the most selfish thing I've ever done." Getting involved with the hospital, she has often repeated, "opened up a whole new world to me—a world of people who are dedicated, hardworking, caring and unselfish." Hospital administrators have applied the same adjectives to her—and added "gracious, intelligent, and possessing a remarkable appetite for life."

Because they know how much the hospital means to her, and know she is not going to hit them up for a number of causes, potential benefactors, she insists, give generously when she approaches them. She says that some society ladies (whom she is too polite to identify) lend their names to many different charities and are listed as benefit chairmen for nearly everything. "There are more benefits than parties in the city these days," she grins wickedly, "and a lot of snob appeal attached to 'the right' benefit."

Now living on a corporate stretch of Park Avenue, an area she tartly refers to as "Banksville," Mildred Hilson is as intrigued by New York's countless possibilities today as she was in her teenage years, and still has a "remarkable appetite" for museums, movies, plays, operas, parties, restaurants. She looks up sharply, with the typical New Yorker's question: "Do you know of any new, really good, inexpensive restaurants?"

On many of her outings she is accompanied by people less than half her age, who are delighted by her charm. She is equally delighted by her circle of young friends: "They think differently, act differently, have a different perspective." Best of all, she concludes impishly, "They don't talk about their health, their clothes and their servants."

Allie Burchenal Ault laughs delightedly when someone repeats that comment to her, for although she wouldn't put it the same way, she shares the sentiment. Slender, bright and curious, with a brisk, no-nonsense attitude toward pretension, she has a boundless affection for young people—and they for her. Her New York apartment is unofficial headquarters for her sons, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and innumerable nieces and nephews. A few years ago, as head of the New York Exchange for Woman's Work, she loaded its board with young people, only to have them turn around and elect her president—which wasn't what she had in mind at all. This month, to make way for new blood, she is retiring as president and will serve instead as honorary chairman.

The Cincinnati-born New Yorker-by-choice discovered Manhattan during well-chaperoned ("chaperoned front and back, believe me") field trips from The Masters School in Dobbs Ferry. "I'll be forever grateful to my father," she says today, "for sending me to school there." When she and her husband, printing executive Bromwell Ault, moved to the city in 1931, she didn't find it cold or intimidating in the slightest. The Junior League, and St. James Church on Madison Avenue gave her an instant circle of friends and a constructive outlet for her considerable energy. "It's not hard to get involved with a church," she laughs. "You show up, and if the body's warm, they find plenty for you to do."

Since then she's done plenty—and she shows no signs of stopping. After her husband died in 1972, she was asked to sit on the board of The Episcopal Church Foundation,

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of which he'd been a member. Today she concentrates her energy on the foundation's Graduate Fellowship Program for Theological Education. She still walks to her office at The New York Exchange for Woman's Work, works on consignments, and invites the press and interesting young men and women to its teas and its annual Theatre Benefit. "It's important to get young people involved," she insists, "because no matter where they go, they'll *stay* involved."

Music, however, is her great passion. "Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall are my beat," she says, sounding like a cub reporter. A casual array of autographed photos of the great and soon-to-be-great of the music world hangs on a wall in her Fifth Avenue apartment. The friends she has made over the years span the generations from Mrs. August Belmont ("remarkable woman, knew how to get things done"), who got her involved with the Metropolitan Opera National Council in the 1940s, to Beverly Sills at the New York City Opera. "Beverly is an exceptional leader; someday she will be recognized as *the* dynamic musical force in this century." Beverly Sills, Allie Ault believes, will long be remembered for nurturing young American singers, a task that is central to the New York City Opera's philosophy.

Eyes sparkling with excitement, Mrs. Ault describes these young singers, whom she hears at auditions or at The Juilliard School and The Mannes College of Music recitals and concerts. Dedication and dreams never fail to impress her. Nor does bright promise. "There will never be another Birgit Nilsson, but there will be a someone else—and when you first hear a pure, talented voice, even though it's not yet completely trained, it gives you a thrill beyond belief."

With her adventurous spirit, it is hardly surprising that one of Allie Ault's favorite things about New York is its bus service: "You can just hop on, drop in your coins and go as far and wide as you please." On opera nights, she frequently rides the crosstown bus—which "zooms through Central Park to Fifth Avenue"—chatting with fellow passengers about the performance. Not everyone talks to just anyone in New York, of course. Operagoers, she points out slyly, recognize one another "because we're all carrying programs."

Like the other great ladies of the city, Allie Ault rediscovers its endless possibilities every day. "People ask me where I go in winter. But what would I do if I went away? Lie on a beach?" She looks astounded. "There's just too much going on here. . . . People ask me where I go in the summer. But why would I leave? I might miss something." For her, New York is—she grabs at an old-fashioned expression—"It."

Evelyn Annenberg Hall is similarly enthusiastic about New York. On this glorious morning, she is looking out her window somewhat wistfully; she would love—although she is too polite to say so—to get started on her daily two-mile walk through this "most fascinating, scintillating city."

If the city fathers were really smart, they would hire Mrs. Melville Wakeman Hall as official booster. Reticent about herself, she talks about New York easily, in paeans. "It is," she waves a hand, "ever changing, never stagnant; so wonderful that when I come back from the great cities of Europe, I could get down and kiss the streets."

Evelyn Annenberg came to New York from Milwaukee at 8, when her father was asked by William Randolph Hearst to be the first publisher of the *Daily Mirror*. Later she studied at the Art Students League and spent a few months in Paris at the Sorbonne. Even as a young girl she had an eye for art; at a very early age she started the remarkable art collection that now adorns the Halls' East Side apartment. One of her best-loved paintings is her first Picasso, bought forty years ago for a modest sum. She doesn't collect anymore: "I love what I've collected over the years, and I would be very unhappy to take down a picture to replace it with another."

Her knowledge of art, and her enthusiasm, have made Evelyn Hall a valuable asset to the Museum of Modern Art, where she serves as a trustee and sits on several committees. She is so dedicated that she seems, on this morning, to feel personally responsible for the rain that deluged the previous night's benefit in MoMA's garden.

She and her husband, a fourth-generation New Yorker and retired real estate executive, attend their share of New York parties and benefits—especially for causes with which she is involved. "Well," she says practically, "I couldn't ask someone else to buy a ticket and not go myself, now could I?" Nevertheless, they often like to stay at home for a private evening of reading and quiet

Robert C. Wright, Ann Reinking and Board President Cheever Tyler attended a benefit event to launch an endowment campaign to secure the continuance of the Shubert Performing Arts Center in New Haven and to unveil the center's new Shubert Hall of Fame.

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conversation.

Such evenings are a welcome—even necessary—respite for this dynamic woman, who also serves on the board of Just One Break (an agency that places qualified disabled workers in mainstream jobs), and on the board of overseers of Dartmouth's Hopkins Center and Hood Museum of Art and the Administrative Board of the Society of Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. At the hospital, she puts in many hours with the recreation department and the well-known Flower Program. "We are," she says proudly, "the only hospital to put fresh flowers in the room of every incoming patient." Even in Palm Beach (where the Halls go every winter) she doesn't slow her pace, but jumps right back into her work at Planned Parenthood and serves on the board of St. Mary's Hospital. She seems to think it abnormal that she requires a scant six hours of sleep a night. Given her schedule, however, it's rather fortunate.

Hearing that someone has described New York as "an architectural disaster," she rushes to the city's defense: "Of course, we do have a lot of glass and metal, but we also have some of the most beautiful old buildings anywhere—and we're preserving them." City treasures—both architectural and botanical—are being restored to their former splendor, she notes, and in some instances are taking on an even finer aspect. After eliciting a promise from a visitor to stroll through the "magnificent" Conservatory Garden at Fifth Avenue and 105th Street, she pulls out an editorial that describes the Edenic qualities of morning in Central Park. The piece praises the Central Park Conservancy (she is on its Women's Committee) for all it has done to make the park safer and more hospitable, and, not incidentally, for planting thousands of trees, shrubs and flowers. (A love of flowers runs in the family: Mrs. Hall's sister Enid A. Haupt is also known for her contributions to the beautification of New York, especially at the New York Botanical Gardens and The Cloisters.) Evelyn Hall's enthusiasm is infectious; suddenly one sees New York as she see it—a shining, dazzling, beautiful city.

Possibly no one is more responsible for New York's dazzling beauty than Mary Woodard Lasker. Since 1942, she has brightened the city with millions of bulbs, bushes and flowering trees—and since 1982, she has mobilized the fundraising for the Memorial Holiday Trees that turn Park Avenue into a fairyland every year.

This Radcliffe graduate and widow of advertising pioneer Albert D. Lasker is revered around the world for her forty-eight-year commitment to finding cures for cancer, cardiovascular disease, mental illness, arthritis, neurological diseases and

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blindness. She has pressed for governmental funding for medical research and, through the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation, which she and her husband founded in 1942, has personally sought to encourage leading medical researchers and public health administrators. Forty-five winners of the foundation's prestigious Albert Lasker Medical Research Awards have gone on to win the Nobel Prize.

But in New York, Mary Lasker is perhaps best known as the lady who proved that natural beauty could bloom amid steel monoliths and traffic jams. Salvador Dali realized her vision. On commission from her, he painted *New York*, a misty, grayish cityscape dominated by the Chrysler Building. Splashed across the foreground, seeming to pop up from the bottom frame, are the brightest, reddest roses imaginable. It hangs now on the wall of her weekend house in Greenwich.

In Watertown, Wisconsin, Mary Woodard's mother founded the first parks in town, and instructed her daughter to "make the world a better place for *your* having been there." The daughter listened well. When she moved to New York in the 1920s, she loved the energy and variety of the city but found it "visually dreary." And that, she says, "annoyed me." Nothing annoys this determined lady forever; she changes it.

Early on, she donated two million winter-hardy chrysanthemums, which were planted in city parks; a whole section of the Conservatory Gardens was carpeted in them and dedicated to her mother, Sara J. Woodard. Then, in memory of her husband, Mrs. Lasker gave 275 *kwanzan* (Japanese flowering cherry) trees to the United Nations Park and followed them up with more cherry trees and some 50,000 white daffodil bulbs. In all five boroughs, she has blanketed bleak corners with azaleas, begonias and marigolds, as well as Bartlett pear, ginko, double-flowering cherry and dogwood trees, bearing, at a conservative estimate, a total of 100 million blossoms.

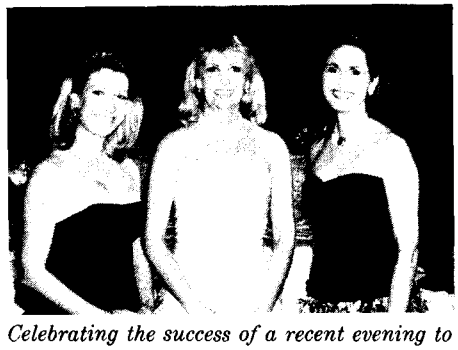
In 1956, ignoring warnings from then-City Parks Commissioner Robert Moses that nothing would grow in the exhaust-filled city air, she saw to it that twenty blocks of Park Avenue were planted in tulips and daffodils. Her efforts to make the meridiens more pleasing to the eye over the years have won her the sobriquet The Garden Lady of Park Avenue. Now, under the care of the Cooperative Community Project, the meridiens are a flourishing testament to her foresight and perseverance. The latest testament came in 1988, when she received the Parks Council Annual Award.

Wanting to make a city a more livable, civilized place is, to her, so obviously important as to be "a simple-minded idea," and she has scant patience for the people who agree but don't do anything about it. Not many would have done as much as she has. This year, Peter Van de Wetering, landscape architect for the Park Avenue Malls Planting Project, named a new pink tulip after her. When she asked why, he said gently: "Mrs. Lasker, the only person in the world who has bought more tulips than you is the Queen of England."

As she'd be quick to point out, she could never have done it all alone. Mary Lasker donates, initiates. . .and gets others involved. A self-described "born lobbyist," she applied the same techniques to beautifying New York as she employed to funding medical research. She went to the source of big money and got City Hall to make matching gifts and budget allocations that would cover the cost of tending what she had already planted. One of her favorite mayors was Robert Wagner, who, in the 1950s, pitched in with city muscle for the glorious Salute to the Seasons. Orchestras played on the steps of the New York Public Library, corporations pledged their support, and seemingly every person in the city was inspired to plant at least one flower.

It has always been a goal of hers "to see New York looking as glorious as Paris." So she has been encouraged by Mayor Koch's effort "to plant trees where there weren't any before." Now she's hoping he'll allocate yet more city funds to the Parks' Department's Tree Program.

The problem with trying to improve a city is that every time the administration changes, "you have to start—like Sisyphus—all over again." Still, she remains eternally optimistic. Just as she hopes that medical research will conquer major diseases within the next ten years, she sees a time in the near future when everyone will catch onto her "simpleminded idea." Banks of wildflowers will line the nation's highways and every city will bloom, "dreary" no more. If it can happen in New York, it could happen anywhere. □



Celebrating the success of a recent evening to further vision research at the Doheny Eye Institute are cochairmen of the Luminaires Juniors support group Cindy Hall and Barbara Fisher with Candida Genzmer, president.